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ABSTRACT

The mass production of books dealing with hitherto taboo subjects for children, such as drug use, divorce, illegitimacy, and death, is a growing trend in children's literature. This paper attempts to demonstrate the inherent difficulties in judging such books critically through a discussion of the handling of death in current children's fiction. Four books are examined for the sociological and psychological attitudes they take toward death as well as their literary value in terms of style, plot, and characterization: (1) "Annie and the Old One" by Miska Miles (for children six to eight); "The Magic Moth" by Virginia Lee (for children eight to ten); (3) "A Taste of Blackberries" by Doris Buchanan Smith (for children eight to eleven); and (4) "Grover" by Vera and Bill Cleaver (for children ten to thirteen). This paper concludes that all of the books discussed, with the exception of "The Magic Moth," are commendable works, combining both quality and relevancy. (TS)

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DEATH IN CURRENT CHILDREN'S FICTION: SOCIOLOGY OR LITERATURE

by

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A growing trend in children's literature today is the mass production of books dealing with hitherto taboo subjects for children such as drug use (and abuse), divorce, illegitimacy, homosexuality, death, and the like. This particular literary trend reflects the new openness in discussing such topics, and it presents new problems in critically evaluating the material. Certain books, for example, may present sound sociological and psychological attitudes in the guise of fiction, with or without quality. I will try to demonstrate the inherent difficulties in judging such works critically through a discussion of the handling of death in current children's fiction.

The subject of death in writings for children is not a new one, for out of our Puritan heritage "the idea of an early death and the necessity of preparing for it was a theme that was never laid to rest."[1] Two of the best-known works containing that theme were The New England Primer and Thomas Janeway's A Token for Children, Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyous Deaths of several young children. The latter

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work's "wide popularity gave rise to many of similar tenor."[2] However, the emphasis here was religious, on leading the good virtuous life so as not to be eternally damned.

In the twentieth century books for children have touched upon the subject, but either in terms of an animal's death or as a side issue rather than as a main focus of the story. Certainly the death of Charlotte in Charlotte's Web is one of the most moving experiences for children and often produces tears, but it is not the central problem of the book. Bambi's mother is killed quite early in that novel, but again that is not central; it serves to instill in Bambi the necessary self-reliance and caution needed for his own survival and to foster antipathy toward hunting in the reader. In two more recent, highly praised works for children, Julie of the Wolves by Jean Craighead George and Incident at Hawk's Hill by Allan W. Eckert, death again comes from the hand of hunters, directly in the former when the wolves are shot at from an airplane, and indirectly in the latter when the badger's babies slowly starve to death because their mother is caught in a trap just outside her den. These are painful moments for the reader, yet familiar ones if he has read other books about wild animals, for as Allan Eckert explains, "few wild animals--regardless of species--ever live out their full life-spans; a violent death almost always intervenes."[3] This is further demonstrated at the end of that story when the badger is shot, apparently mortally.

Still, as painful as it might be to the reader, the death of an animal simply does not have the same effect as when a member of the immediate family or a close personal friend dies and the book concentrates on that problem and what happens as a result of it. The current crop of books having such a pivotal point around which the characters play out their reactions and emotions is an entirely different matter from Julie and Incident. This can perhaps best be demonstrated in the following books: Annie and the Old One, by Miska Miles (for children six to eight); The Magic Moth, by Virginia Lee, and A Taste of Blackberries, by Doris

Buchanan Smith (for children eight to ten or eleven); and Grover, by Vera and Bill Cleaver (for children ten or eleven to thirteen). They all reflect sociological attitudes, but do they have literary merit as well?

Before discussing the books in terms of that question, I should like to point out another problem with some of the books on the subject of death, and that is that once the book is on the library shelves one no longer has control over who reads it. And psychologists seem to agree with the Gesell Institute's findings:

> Each family has to work out the details of its own solutions. The child's questions, the child's age, the circumstances which arise, are different in each case....Also how much or how little you say will depend on circumstances.[4]

Further on that attitude is again stressed:

> Though each age has a certain capacity to question and to understand the facts about death, each individual's response is a personal matter.[5]

This is especially true of books that deal centrally with death, that go into great detail about cause and effect, about the funeral and burial. And, as Marjorie Mitchell points out,

> many children between nine and ten do show real fear of death.... it is from the ages from nine until adolescence that children who now accept death realistically also show terror of non-existence. These terrors are usually covered up by denials, jokes, tough attitudes.[6]

In other words, you cannot tell what fears may be aroused and/or stimulated by the reading of excessively descriptive books on the subject.

The Magic Moth is a case in point where the level of explanation may be too much for the child who might be drawn to the book by its format (the relatively short length, larger print, fairly frequent illustrations would tend to appeal to a nine- or ten-year-old). Six-year-old Mark-O is trying to understand the death of his sister, Maryanne. He remembers his guinea pig William who had died and was buried in the yard, and he talks about Maryanne's being in the ground and what she will feel.[7] Here the subject is handled well, with a comforting explanation offered

by his mother:

> "She will go to sleep and not know she is here. The important part of her, that does the dreaming, will be someplace else."[8]

But the author doesn't leave it at that but continues to dwell on the subject: when Mark-O wants to dig up William, his nine-year-old sister tells him

> "there wouldn't be much of anything left and besides it would look awful...."
> "Why wouldn't there be anything left?"
> "Because, if you bury something it just becomes a part of the ground after a while."[9]

Instead of being satisfied Mark-O equates what will happen out of his sight under the ground with the times he has been shut out of Maryanne's room by his mother, and his frustration is evident: "Why is it that all the important things happen under the ground or behind closed doors?"[10] Again, this kind of emphasis on the burial may be fine for some children but not suitable at all for others:

> Children differ in behavior and development. Some are responsible and stable; others are more immature and younger in relation to their years. Girls are generally more mature than boys. The ability to cope with the material will depend upon the maturity of the individual and his ability to cope with his problems.[11]

So we are back again to the lack of control over who reads the book.

Certainly I do not want to imply here that the subject of death should be taboo for children. Indeed the trend now is to bring it out into the open, to discuss it in all its aspects. As Gilbert Kliman states,

> In those instances in which one sibling is dying, if parents are made aware of this situation and discuss such an event freely and frankly with their children in terms that the children can understand, it will draw the family closer together and give them greater strength with which to face their bereavement. It will also avert future emotional difficulties for the surviving children by providing an atmosphere of trust and love which will make it possible to meet and solve the problems of later life.[12]

In many universities there are now courses on death education open to and widely attended by students. Such courses have been considered in various high schools as well. As a clinical professor of psychiatry reports,

> it may be pertinent that we not shut out children from the realities of death....Naturally, level of explanation, timing, and individual differences have to be appreciated.[13]

It is the last part of the above quotation that concerns me about The Magic Moth. The possibility that a child who is not quite ready for such a large dose of realism might be attracted by the cover and/or title and read the book and become upset by it is quite likely.

Parts of the book are sociologically well done. The explanation at the beginning "that there were some things doctors could not yet repair, and this was one of them,"[14] followed later by the doctor's more explicit explanation to the children in terms they could understand of why Maryanne would die soon, should satisfy the reader's desire to know why medicine couldn't save her. And the minister's explanation of death as a'"step through a door into another place that we cannot see with our eyes'"[15] certainly offers a kind of hope to the child reader. However, neither the doctor nor the minister is developed as a real character, but seem to be included for sociological reasons rather than for literary ones. Later the parents' open grief and willingness to talk about it are to be commended, along with their explaining that that, too, will pass in time.

Mark-O's feelings are expressed in very realistic terms; in fact, all of the dialogue is very realistic and lifelike and that is part of the problem. Is "a slice of life" really good literature without character development, or should it be placed in the category of a sociological study, where it can be taken out and used for a particular individual at a particular time when the need arises? The lack of characterization here seems to imply a sociological rather than a literary approach, an attempt to convey currently approved psychological attitudes couched in story form. Certainly a teacher would be running a risk in picking out such a book to read to a class without warning, whereas Charlotte's Web is frequently read to a group without any serious aftereffects. That book is far different from

The Magic Moth, which is much more difficult for the average child reader to digest without having nightmares afterwards. As Mitchell points out,

> Children are very prone to this kind of fear [of the act of dying], which may reveal itself in dreams or nightmares. The source of such fears may lie in books, newspapers, and magazines read by children.[16]

A book with similar format and age appeal as The Magic Moth is A Taste of Blackberries. It is also similar in its incorporation of the preparations for the funeral and the burial and certainly in its sociological aspects, but with a difference that should become apparent. The book concerns two young boys who are best buddies. It is the first person narration by one of them (never named) about his relationship with the other boy, Jamie, that is shattered when Jamie dies after being stung by a bee. The characterization is skillfully handled as the boy comments about his friend:

> That Jamie. For my best friend he surely did aggravate me sometimes. I mean, if we got to pretending--circus dogs, for instance--he didn't know when to quit. You could get tired and want to do something else but that stupid Jamie would crawl around barking all afternoon. Sometimes it was funny. Sometimes it was just plain tiresome.[17]

Jamie's character (and the narrator's) is further revealed through the action of the first day, when he races to the farmer's apple tree to steal two apples even though he has heard that the farmer guards the tree with his shotgun. Later that morning when the two boys are out walking with Jamie's little sister Martha and a storm overtakes them, he sticks out his thumb to hitch a ride for them even though both sets of parents have forbidden the children to hitchhike. Even the driver warns them against what they are doing.[18] And so the scene is set for the next incident, the reader very much aware of the reckless, fun-loving, yet stubborn nature of Jamie.

The children in the neighborhood have been asked by Mrs. Houser to scrape Japanese beetles off her grapevines, and all are busy except Jamie who is poking a stick at a bee hole in the ground despite the protests of the others. Soon the bees

appear and swarm after the children.

> The kids were all screaming and yelling and running for home.
> Except Jamie. He was already home, next door to Mrs. Houser, and he wanted to put on one of his dramatic shows for everyone. He screamed and gasped and fell on the ground.
> Sometimes Jamie made me sick....With the apples and the hitchhiking, I'd had enough of Jamie for one day. I cut across Jamie's backyard to avoid the bees and went down the other side of the house and across the street to my house. I looked back and Jamie was still putting on his act, writhing on the ground.
> "You might as well quit it, you brat," I said under my breath. "Nobody's even watching you."[19]

This time, however, Jamie wasn't fooling; although stung only once or twice, he had a fatal reaction.

The narrator's feelings are explored when he learns from his mother what has happened: the knowing, yet not wanting to believe, the questioning--

> "Why did he have to die?"[20]

and some responses from Mrs. Mullins who lives next door--

> "Honey, one of the hardest things we have to learn is that some questions do not have answers." I nodded. This made more sense than if she tried to tell me some junk about God needing Angels....
> "What's it like to be dead? Or is that another one of those questions?"
> "It's one of those questions," she said. "You just don't know until you can find out yourself and apparently you can't come back and tell what you find out."[21]

On the other hand, Jamie's younger sister Martha has been told that Jamie is in heaven. "'He's going to get to play with all the angels.' She seemed happy for him."[22] Here the differing needs of the two children have been satisfied, although some adults might object to the conversation with Mrs. Mullins, even though Mitchell appears to agree with her answer in part:

> Neither the dogma of immortality nor that of death being the final end is the one most likely to create positive attitudes in the child and adolescent. Nor to the young child is the simple, agnostic 'I don't know' very helpful. But 'No one yet knows' is quite another matter and is in keeping with the natural urge of the exploring child who from babyhood is bent on finding out what life is about.[23]

Through his thoughts and actions during the next few days more of the

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narrator's feelings are revealed: his remembering of the things he and Jamie did together; his determination not to let life go on as usual, at least until after the funeral; and his attempt to create a miracle.

> I kept feeling that if I did certain things, like think about Jamie in the bathtub or didn't do certain things, like eat, that somehow everything would be all right and it wouldn't be true that Jamie was dead. Like it was really a dream and we would all wake up any minute and there would be Jamie clowning around and making us laugh.[24]

But the realization of death grows, outweighing the longing, as he goes to the funeral with his parents and then to the cemetery for the burial. His final thought there may be more difficult for some adults to accept in a children's book that it will be for a child:

> During the prayer I looked at the toes of my shoes. It was hard to think about God when something as small as a bee could kill your best friend.[25]

But adults should remember or be aware that

> A particular fear in childhood, more so than in later life, is of sudden death. Not only does this appear to be a terrible manner of dying but it makes life itself appear so entirely unstable.[26]

Under the circumstances, the narrator's feelings are easily understood.

The next day after the funeral the boy takes two baskets to fill with blackberries, one for his own mother, the other for Jamie's. He hears the other children playing and feels guilty and ashamed because he knows that he would like to join them. And although his mother had explained earlier that Jamie's death had nothing to do with him, that he could not have helped Jamie because of the overwhelming allergic reaction he had had, nevertheless guilt feelings continued from then on. As both Grollman and Mitchell observe,[27] that is a perfectly normal reaction. At the end the understanding of Jamie's mother releases the narrator:

> In my relief I thought that Jamie, too, was glad the main sadness was over. I wondered how fast angels, or whatever he was now, could move.
> "Race you," I called to him and I ran up the hill.[28]

Here is a book similar to The Magic Moth in its sociological aspects, but with more literary skill. Characterization is developed so that Jamie's personality is indelibly stamped upon the reader by the time he is stung by the bee and the narrator's relationship to him is well-defined. His thoughts, feelings, and attitudes are real, and the fact that the narrator is never named enables the reader to slip even more easily into the "I" of the story. There are fewer extraneous characters to give sociological viewpoints than there were in The Magic Moth, and they seem more human (MRs. Mullins as opposed to the minister). The story is tighter, less dependent upon soap-box conversations for effect, and can withstand critical scrutiny where The Magic Moth often falls short. Howver, A Taste of Blackberries may also cause certain children to become upset. Therefore I would be very much aware of the temperament of the child such a book was given to: it is a book with literary merit, written about a subject that has been taboo for too long, but still it is one that should be presented with discretion.

Although Grover is for older children, and deals not only with death but with violence as well, it too can withstand critical scrutiny. Because of excellent characterizations and plot development the reader, along with the main character, is able to take the mother's suicide in stride: the shock is diminished. The child reader can easily identify with Grover from the very beginning when he returns home Sunday morning from making rounds with his veterinarian uncle to discover that something is wrong. His mother has to go at once to a hospital to have an operation, and Grover is not to ask any questions but simply do as he is told. His fears begin to build as the days pass, for the air is charged with foreboding, yet noone will tell him anything and he becomes convinced that his mother is going to die. Then when she comes home and begins to look a little better he starts to think that he had been worried for nothing, until she becomes ill during an outing that has to be cut short. Soon after that she shoots herself. Grover can understand her not wanting her family to see her suffer, but his father cannot accept that and insists

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her death was an accident, taking Grover's attention away from the death itself to focus upon this new problem:

> It's some kind of test, Grover thought. He wants me to say that it isn't fair and that part's all right but it wasn't an accident. She was sick, awful sick. And she didn't want...No, I don't know what she didn't want. I'm just guessing. But it wasn't an accident...He wants me to think that she climbed up and got the gun from that storage place on the back porch and carried it to her room just to look at it and it went off accidentally, but that isn't so.[29]

Fortunately Grover has Rose, the woman who comes every day to take care of things, to talk to. Rose is a down-to-earth person, warm, with a good sense of humor, just what Grover needs at this particular time. Her attitude that "When something's finished you got to let go of it"[30] is something that Grover can understand, rather than his father's position that

> A decent interval should pass...before he should resume his usual occupations. A great tragedy had just been suffered. Was he impervious to it?[31]

Rose tries to clean out the mother's room, but later when Mr. Ezell returns, he puts everything back in its place again, even adding a spread and two pillows.[32]

In addition to Rose, Grover has two close friends to turn to, Farrell and Ellen Grae. But not all people are warm and understanding. Betty Repkin, who "was mean and stingy so nobody liked to work for her,"[33] employs the trio one day, and when one of her turkeys appears to have been disturbed by the children, she comments viciously to Grover:

> "Suicide is a coward's way....And it's you and your dad'll pay for it a little bit, too, huh? <u>Then</u> we'll see how smart you talk."[34]

Grover seeks revenge, accompanied by his two reluctant but faithful friends, and an explicit, bloody scene follows as Grover kills Mrs. Repkin's turkey. Yet there is an abrupt shift to religion on the next page that helps to distract the reader from the previous traumatic scene, as Rose explains her beliefs:

> "the people who've cheated and lied and murdered will catch it then. They'll have to grub and slave from sunup to sundown. They'll

> have to do all the work. Us people who've been good will get to lie around and eat chocolates all day long.[35]

Grover is filled with such diversions, human touches that give depth to characterization. Reverend Vance, for example, is a real person; he has troubles with his car and moles in his lawn, and he obviously doesn't know all the answers. He presents a vivid contrast to the minister in The Magic Moth who is only a figure-head, a speaker whose human side is never fully revealed. Although his sociological attitude would probably be acceptable to the majority of the readers, critically his characterization leaves much to be desired. These differences are seen repeatedly when comparing the two books; Grover, the potentially more traumatic one, becomes, through depth of characterization that gives insight to the feelings of both adults and children, a book worthy of the critical acclaim it has received. It offers the reader not a treatise on death and how various people deal with it in a sociological way, but a healthy view of life and how people respond to it during the bad times as well as the good, giving the reader new insights on life and people.

The last book, Annie and The Old One, differs from the others in that the death does not occur within the story. And it is also for younger children. Annie is a Navajo child living in a hogan with her mother, father, and grandmother, the Old One. One evening the grandmother calls them to her and says, "'My children, when the new rug is taken from the loom, I will go to Mother Earth.'"[36] Annie, who dearly loves the Old One, tries to prevent her mother from finishing the rug, first by letting the sheep out (thinking that her parents will have to search for them all day), and then by stealing out to the loom at night to remove the yarn. Her grandmother discovers what she is doing and explains to her:

> "you have tried to hold back time. This cannot be done.... The sun comes up from the edge of earth in the morning. It returns to the edge of earth in the evening. Earth, from which good things come for the living creatures on it. Earth, to which all creatures finally go."[37]

Annie then realizes what her grandmother is trying to tell her:

> She knew that she was a part of the earth and the things on it. She would always be a part of the earth, just as her grandmother had always been, would always be, always and forever. And Annie was breathless with the wonder of it.[38]

This philosophy is almost exactly what Mitchell propounds:

> All we can say, in truth, is that the particles of the body will finally be distributed into earth, air, and water, part of the known universe, and may become united into living molecules again. We do not emphasize this nearly enough.[39]

In Annie and the Old One the writer's style predominates. Miska Miles has captured the quiet dignity of the Indian family he has portrayed, and their kinship with the land and with all living things. A bit of Indian myth is incorporated when Annie "thought about the coyote--God's Dog--guarding the scattered hogans of the Navajos."[40] And touches of Navajo life are given (the father creating silver jewelry, the mother weaving, etc.), but not in a series of long descriptions; the paragraphs are very brief, often not more than a sentence or two, giving the work a poetic flavor that resembles Navajo poetry in its tone.

Characterization is not neglected, either. Since the book is for younger children and is therefore brief, only Annie and the Old One are fully developed. Annie reacts in very human terms: at school she cannot concentrate because of her concern for her grandmother, and she deliberately misbehaves hoping that her parents will be called to school and another day's weaving will be lost. Also she doesn't know how her grandmother knows that she will die when the rug is finished. Her mother explains:

> "Your grandmother is one of those who live in harmony with all nature--with earth, coyote, birds in the sky. They know more than many will ever learn. Those Old Ones know."[41]

And the grandmother's sense of humor is revealed in the things that she and Annie laugh at together: a mouse skittering across the floor of their hogan, and bread that got too well done and is burnt about the edges.[42] The sense of comradeship between the two is so very strong that one almost forgets the Old One's age until

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an illustration or the text demonstrates it:

> There were other times when her grandmother sat small and still, and Annie knew that she was very old. Then Annie would cover the thin knees of the Old One with a warm blanket.[43]

On the next page Annie touches her grandmother's wrinkled face (in text and in illustration). The strong bond of love between the two gives an added depth of feeling and heightens the effect of the Old One's approaching death on Annie and the reader.

Here we have seen still another view or attitude towards death that is sociologically sound incorporated in a book that withstands critical scrutiny: there has been no sacrificing literary quality for the sake of presenting a desired attitude. The reader's age and probable experience have been taken into account, and graphic descriptions of the act of dying and of burial are not included. Instead the concentration is on characterization and a strong sense of tone and setting heightened by Peter Parnall's excellent illustrations. The result is a work of merit.

It is probable that still more books on the subject of death for children will follow, and it is to be hoped that they will depend on quality writing in addition to sound sociological attitudes for their effect. Three out of the four books discussed here were able to combine both successfully: the task is not an impossible one. This is also desired in realistic books on other subjects, too, that are now flooding the market, many of them of poor quality as Sheila Egoff has observed:

> that problems should provide themes for children's literature is not being questioned, for they should if literature is to reflect life, but it is clear that in most cases the demand for problem books is being filled by highly superficial and mediocre writing.[44]

Publishers are not without their share of the blame, for too frequently in their desire to capitalize on what seems to be a high-interest trend they neglect the quality of the material in favor of relevancy. And when the book does contain

commendable attitudes it is often more difficult to be objective in judging it critically. Yet the combination of quality and relevancy can be achieved as has been demonstrated here: one need not settle for sociological soundness alone. The critic must be aware of and avoid the danger of being taken in by the sociology because he agrees with it: this attitude may blur his perception of the literary quality or the lack of it that the book contains.[45]

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[1] Cornelia Meigs et al., A Critical History of Children's Literature (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 124.

[2] Meigs, p. 125.

[3] Allan W. Eckert, Incident at Hawk's Hill (New York: Dell, 1972), p. 56.

[4] Frances L. Ilg and Louise Bates Ames, The Gesell Institute's Child Behavior (New York: Dell, 1956), p. 335. The italics are mine.

[5] Ilg and Ames, p. 338.

[6] Marjorie Editha Mitchell, The Child's Attitude to Death (New York: Schocken, 1967), p. 62.

[7] Virginia Lee, The Magic Moth (New York: Seabury, 1972), pp. 24-6.

[8] Lee, p. 26.

[9] Ibid., p. 32.

[10] Ibid., p. 33.

[11] Earl A. Grollman, ed., Explaining Death to Children (Boston: Beacon, 1967), p. 5.

[12] Gilbert Kliman, "The Child Faces His Own Death," in Death and Bereavement, ed. Austin H. Kutscher (New York: Thomas, 1969), p. 26.

[13] Herman Feifel, "The Meaning of Death in American Society: Implications for Education," in Death Education: Preparation for Living, ed. Betty R. Green and Donald P. Irish (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1971), p. 5. The italics are mine.

[14] Lee, p. 12.

[15] Ibid., p. 46.

[16] Mitchell, pp. 91-2.

[17] Doris Buchanan Smith, A Taste of Blackberries, ill. Charles Robinson (New York: Crowell, 1973), p. 2.

[18] Smith, pp. 14-15.

[19] Ibid., p. 19.

[20] Ibid., p. 43.

[21] Ibid., pp. 43-4.

[22] Ibid., p. 45.

[23] Mitchell, p. 72.

[24] Smith, p. 46.

[25] Ibid., p. 51.

[26] Mitchell, p. 92.

[27] Grollman, pp. 19, 22-3; Mitchell, pp. 107, 114.

[28] Smith, p. 58.

[29] Vera and Bill Cleaver, Grover (New York: Lippincott, 1970), p. 73.

[30] Cleaver, p. 79.

[31] Ibid., p. 77.

[32] Ibid., p. 82.

[33] Ibid., p. 84.

[34] Ibid., p. 89.

[35] Ibid., pp. 98-9.

[36] Miska Miles, Annie and the Old One, ill. Peter Parnall (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 15.

[37] Miles, p. 41.

[38] Ibid., p. 41.

[39] Mitchell, p. 113.

[40] Miles, p. 10.

[41] Ibid., p. 16.

[42] Ibid., p. 6.

[43] Ibid., p. 6.

[44] Sheila Egoff, "Precepts and pleasures: changing emphases in the writing and criticism of children's literature," in Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature, ed. Sheila Egoff, G. T. Stubbs, and L. F. Ashley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 436.

[45] For a fine historical article see Francelia Butler, "Death in Children's Literature," Children's Literature, I(1972), 104-124.